



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

April 2017

The Devil and Henry James II

David Ray

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview>

Recommended Citation

Ray, David (2017) "The Devil and Henry James II," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 9 , Article 17.
Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol9/iss1/17>

For more information, please contact southern@usfca.edu.

The Devil and Henry James II

DAVID RAY

The devil comes to offer you another life, that in history you most envy. Henry James? You can write all his novels. Marcus Aurelius? You can sit by his oil lamp and think out those thoughts, share the joys of Stoicism. Keats? You can hear the nightingale as he did.

You're quick to leap at the chance. Who would prefer to be as you are — ill-defined, the few who know your name hating it or holding it in contempt? Not so much, of course, that you're angered enough to choose to take the devil's offer to be Atilla the Hun, to redo that life by piling up the same old pyramids of skulls. Or was that Ghengis Khan? Strangely, you choose no sexual athlete, though you've craved a harem as much, perhaps, as any man.

So you choose a rather quiet life, downright domestic. In fact, not even very domestic. "Henry James, indeed!"

And the devil clarifies. "You realize," he says, "you'll be somewhat overweight, and that many a parlor maid will find you dull, stuffy, not at all distinguished."

"No problem — it's worth it." But the habits you now begin to feel as he felt them — non-habits really. . . . But no indeed not, you won't do that. Envy of your brother William, too, when you'd thought it a mutual admiration, a brotherly love. There's a feeling here, mean as a slam through the windshield, not expected — a consciousness of immaturity, pathetic, sly as a sulking boy. . . .

But to hell with that! The creation is worth it, the New York Edition, in leather. You're going to write all those novels (again), and there'll be the joy of conceiving Daisy Miller as Millais conceived his painting of the song of the lark. As James you'll observe the Colosseum at twilight, gold glowing in the sky, shadows advancing, denser than any sexual darkness, a delicious thrill of, always, remarkable restraint. When suddenly it's upon you, a pang, a pain! The desire with which he glimpsed that woman in the street is ferocious as a lion tearing a Christian. You had no idea, either that Henry James could feel such excruciating desire or that such a woman could provoke it. Yet she became Daisy Miller. Christ, it was in a time, you now realize, when sex was simply not possible. You've chosen a time sandwiched between the orgies of modern times and those of ancient Rome. Henry James

cannot conceive of any way possible to manage, to marvel at, a naked woman. He is driven mad by despair. He writes, sensually, sinuously, in agonizing imitation of passionate body movements; his pen snakes along, twists like a belly dancer. You see that his serifs are throbbing, thrusting at the hip-slides of his W's and circlings of his O's. Beads link a chorus that make his eyes, hypnotic now in their dazed dream-state of creation, pale sleepily. You realize now, feeling Henry's pain, that he wrote for no other reason, but to find an opiate in the dancing chorus line of his wet blue ink. He wrote from a terrible pain because he could find no beautiful body to love; he did not know how to speak to such a body; and because he could not sleep and because he could not let himself think too much without the pen in his hand. It is terrible. You scream out at the devil, and he returns. He has been lingering, expecting this turnabout.

But still, perhaps the creativity would be worth it. You hesitate to assume your own skin again. After all, you can be the great Henry James. The pain on the way to the collected works is worth it.

"But you realize," says the devil, "that if you are Henry James you can be none other than *that* Henry James, with nothing in your life that is not absolutely identical to his. Each detail of your life will be the same — you will be repeating his life, with one difference: you will be, so to speak, programmed. Whereas he worked it all out in actual conflict, afflictingly so, you will be free of that conflict. You will feel the pain, true. But there will be nothing that can keep you from writing *The Wings of the Dove*. James could have solved the conflict another way. Not you! You will feel all the creative agony, yes, but there will be no uncertainty at all. You will become Henry James, and no more. You will move along the track of his life. He was free to cut his throat. You are not."

"*And no more?*" You stare at the devil incredulously.

"Of course not! You will not, e.g., have anything that's unique to this life you lead now."

"No rejection slips?"

"Of course not. But probably somewhere there's something in your life you've done that you'd like not to rid yourself of, perhaps some love you've found that you'd like to carry over. Perhaps only a memory. Or a child. A snapshot, perhaps — the children when they were small, with their hamsters, or riding a unicycle. Or perhaps there's some silly moment that you'd rather try to repeat than give up. It'd all go. You couldn't even scratch your ear again, I noticed that you seemed to enjoy that habit. You see, Henry James never scratched his ear. He

had other idiosyncrasies. You will inherit them all, desirable ones along with the undesirable."

"But I'll be Henry James, right?"

"Yes, of course. But *only* Henry James. Only his bad memories, none of yours. None of your poverty, none of your despairs, only his."

You're charmed by the agreement still. Years of envy guarantee it. The devil's about to take his departure; he's a gentleman with gloves, not so bad as he's rumored.

"You realize you'll be unable to achieve anything, write a single phrase," the devil goes on, "that he did not. It is possible, e.g., that you'd want to write an additional phrase, or cut a sentence here or there, or even write another novel — perhaps applying his immense ability to some pet idea you've been carrying around in your head in the last half of the twentieth century. But none of that will be permitted. Since you've read the biography, you might also want to save yourself the trouble of those twenty years hopelessly trying to become a dramatist, when there's no chance of success, absolutely none."

"But perhaps, the second time around . . ." you suggest.

"Damn your eyes!" the devil scowls. "Can't you get it through your skull that this won't be a second chance. This is simply the first chance again. You said you wanted to be Henry James, not his double or some character who takes off from where he was, to do something different. You're going to do the same thing. You will not be permitted to dot your *i* differently. And there is a very particular punishment for trying to stamp his identity with any new sign of the self you are giving up — even a thought that was not Henry's. . . ." But even as he is talking you are working out a way of getting around him. With James's talent you might want to rewrite someone else's novel, your own — or perhaps *The Last Tycoon*. Free of your self, your talent might blossom.

"You chose wisely," the devil says. "Some people have chosen Fitzgerald. His life has been rerun several times. But never a happy ending."

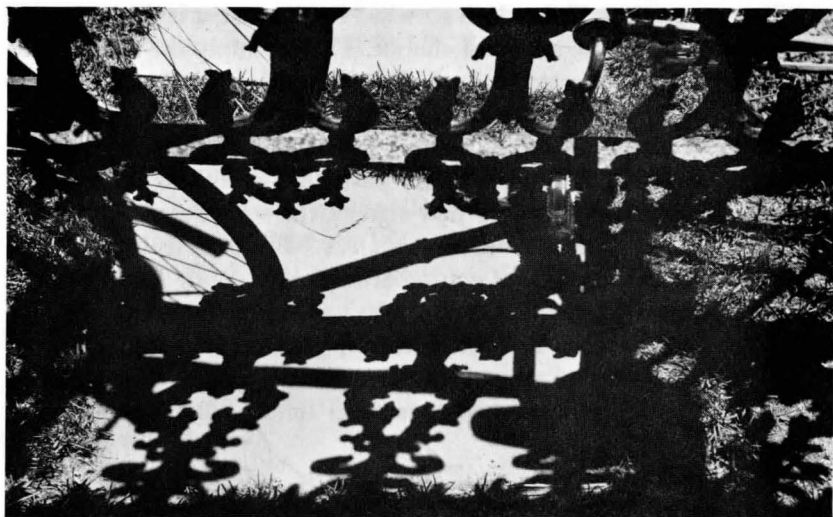
"You are reading my mind?"

"Of course. And you should hear the screams when they get the precise same d.t.'s he suffered in Baltimore, '37. They couldn't care less if they practically had an orgasm writing *Gatsby*. It's all gall."

"But James," you say. "I have the feeling he was a *comfortable* man, at peace with himself. Enjoyed a bit of wine, nothing to excess."

"A great emptiness," says the devil. "Filled with words. But here, get into his morning clothes. You'll get the feel of it. You're not the kind of fellow to take another's word for anything, not even the devil's."

And there you sit, in Henry James' morning coat. And you have been trying to move your pen to say something about this remarkable contract with the devil, to leave a record of it, and to record at least a few of the remarkable thoughts you've started to think in the style of Henry James, and on the subject of really getting into Henry James, the role so to speak, but the pen is moving away from you as if attached to one of those polygraphs Thomas Jefferson invented, it is pulling your hand like a Ouija board. And you are staring at the words that are appearing, dancing slowly at first, "Nothing in fact could more have amused the author than the opportunity of a hunt for a series of reproducible subjects — such moreover as might best consort with photography — the reference of which to Novel or Tale should exactly be *not* competitive and obvious, should on the contrary plead its case with some shyness, that of images always confessing themselves mere optical symbols or echoes, expressions of no particular thing in the text, but only of the type or idea of this or that thing. They were to remain at the most small pictures of our 'set' stage with the actors left out. . . ."



Bela Egyedi